



It's been a hard week...

Let us pray. Gracious God, we gather this day to bring you honor and glory. As the waters of our baptism unite us to Christ who is our brother, so unite us one with another as siblings in Christ.

Strengthen us to serve you faithfully. Both in this wilderness season and throughout our lives.

Our Lord may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you. Our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

It has been a hard week. I know.

We have learned that the Novel Corona Virus that causes COVID-19 has hit our church family directly. And I will tell you that the person that tested positive is doing much better and the entire family is doing well. And thanks to you for your prayers.

It's been a hard week because business as usual at work, at home, in the church, in Austin and in the world has come to a screeching halt.

It's been a hard week for those who are used to leaving home for work, are at home and those that are used to being at home have no choice but to stay there.

And each of us is figuring out how to do more than just survive in this current reality.

It has been a hard week. Especially if you are absorbing everything you can get your eyes and ears on about this global pandemic. The number of those who have tested positive and those who have died are climbing and yes, they continue to climb.

Our goal is no longer how to keep the virus out of our community, it's following the curve and keeping the growth of the virus exponential.

It's to love others by washing our hands. By keeping our distance. By helping, not hoarding and by sheltering in place as much as you can.

Love others by doing what you might have once said – but overreacting.

It's been a hard week, but social distancing can lead to social isolation and that has its own set of issues.

I was listening to a podcast earlier this week

I learned that neuroscientists could tell the difference between a 1-day old baby and a 2-day old baby just by watching them. Because a two-day old baby reacts differently to an object passing in front of them like the flame of a candle or the wave of a hand. Our brains are wired for social interaction. Our brains and our very biology crave community.

It's been a hard week as we are learning how to redefine community when we must be apart.

On social media, I've seen pictures of families from all over the country join together for cocktail hour. I've seen pictures of our young friends having playdates all over the internet.

It's been a hard week learning how we can be a church together when we can't be face-to-face.

To redefine how we worship when we cannot gather in our beloved sanctuary.

I even experimented with some crude Zoom technology by putting pictures of the stain glass windows behind me and the limestone walls of our sanctuary all behind me.

It was a hoot and it was totally distracting. So, you get a view of my guest bedroom wall.

Now, the dresser is my pulpit.

We are learning what it means to do mission, to serve others, and to help when we cannot be close together.

And your session and particularly outreach & mission and your deacons are working hard to figure out how that will look – and you will find out more about that in coming days.

So, back in December, when we decided to make our Lenten theme this year “Wilderness,” we hadn't a remote clue how much of a wilderness we would truly find ourselves in.

And when I chose to call this week on my worship plan, in particular a “disorienting place,” I had no idea what was in store for us.

In fact, I laughed when I looked up what I titled this day back in December because it has been disorienting to say the least. And when we become disoriented, we need direction. We need guidance, and we need vision.

The gospel message today is about what Jesus brings to the wilderness to disorienting places so I invite you to listen to what the spirit has to say to you, to us, and the Gospel of John, chapter 9.

Listen to hear God's word to you.

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples had asked him – Rabbi who sinned? This man or his parents...that he was born blind?

Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

When Jesus had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with his saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes. Saying to him, “Go wash in the pool of Salatim and wash.”

And I went. I washed and received my sight. The neighbors brought to the Pharisees the man who had been formerly blind. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had recovered his sight.

He put mud on my eyes, then I washed, and now I see.

The Pharisees were divided so they said again to the man, “What do you say about him?” It was your eyes that he opened?

The man said, “He is a prophet.” So, for the second time, the Pharisees called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

The man answered, “I’ve told you already and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again?

Do you also want to become his disciples?

Then the Pharisees reviled the man. The man answered, “Here is the astonishing thing: you do not know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes.”

Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.

Jesus heard that they had driven the man out and when he found the man, Jesus said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man? And the man answered, "And who is he sir?" Tell me so that I may believe in him. And Jesus said to him, "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he."

And the man said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped Jesus.

This is the Word of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

The story on the surface is a simple story of healing – A man born blind gets his sight for the very first time, but this story is so much more than that.

It's a story that follows a pattern. One that my seminary professors pointed out when I was in a class about the Psalms.

This story moves from orientating to disorienting to reorientation.

Orientation: Life as it has always been.

A man born blind is going about his day as usual. He wasn't asking Jesus to give him sight. The disciple saw him as a man born blind and assumed his parent must have sinned or he must have sinned to be born blind because that is what they had been taught.

Orientation: The way it has always been done.

Disorientation: When business as usual is turned upside down.

The man can suddenly see.

For those of us who are sighted, we might wonder how he got from where Jesus put mud on his eyes and to the pool to wash. But for that man, going from point A to point B while not being able to see was business as usual. It was orientation.

The disorientation came for him when he could see. When light suddenly flooded his pupils with images his retinas had never seen before. The disorientation came because he could suddenly see.

For his neighbors and the Pharisees, the disorientation came from trying to figure out how this man went from blind to sighted.

No healing like that had ever happened in all of scripture, in all of the stories from generation to generation. The question surrounding the sight that was given to this man were disorienting.

Everything they had ever taken for granted was questioned.

Certainties about how the world worked.

Certainties about how God worked.

Certainties about the practice of faith.

Friends, I think this is the place where we find ourselves this week. Certainties about so much we have taken for granted that we didn't even know we were taking for granted that have been stripped away.

How did this happen? Who can we blame?

What do we do when business as usual is no longer business as usual?

Where is God in all of this? We are in a profound state of disorientation.

This story of Jesus giving sight to a man born blind tells us a lot about what can happen next.

Reorientation: The new normal.

The man's reorientation started at the same time as his disorientation -- as the time the same light flooded his eyes. At the same time his brain saw images for the first time.

And how do you figure out what they meant? At the same time, all five of his senses had a chance to work together for the very first time. His reorientation happened in his response to his disorientation.

The man's response -- how he reacted to his life being turned upside, began the process of his reorientation. His response? He kept telling the story.

He kept telling what happened.

He told his neighbors: "He told me to go and wash and when they couldn't believe what had happened, as their disorientation started, the neighbors took him to the pharisees. They did this because the pharisees were in such close contact with God at all times, they could explain what happened.

He told me to go and wash my eyes. And when that just didn't seem right, the pharisees searched for some loophole. Finding no loopholes, the man said again to their question: No, really. He told me to just go away and wash the mud out of my eyes. Something happened to the man as he told the story.

He didn't embellish it. He didn't try to make it bigger than it actually was. He just told them again what Jesus told him to do. I can almost see him standing up taller as he retold the story.

I can imagine all the certainty that he used to have about how the world worked being slowly replaced with something new. Certainty being replaced with confidence. Confidence colliding with faith.

Certainty replaced with confidence. Replaced with faith.

I did what he told me to do. Wash. Now I can see. This has never happened in all the world. If someone born blind like me can see...and all I did was wash.

Can you not see?

This man Jesus is from God. Confidence, faith and it didn't stop there. Jesus came back to him when he was struggling. He did not leave him alone in his struggle. Listen again to their exchange.

Jesus said to him, "Do you believe in the son of man? And who is he sir? Tell me so I may believe in him. And Jesus said to him "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he. And the man said, "Lord I believe."

Lord, I trust you over all the certainty I have ever had in my life.

Lord I have faith in you.

I will worship you.

I can't see you all. I'm used to seeing you as I'm proclaiming God's word. But I can imagine listening to this man tell his story. Tell of him to wash the mud out of his eyes.

In the midst of the wilderness of a pandemic, is my response.

Your response needs to be like the mans.

Follow what Jesus told me to do. Go wash then. Tell about it. Tell about how God was. How God is in the washing and in the process of doing both. My life will begin to transform.

Transform from what I had been taught about how things were to transform. From one where I tried to receive comfort and calm from the way things had always been. From my safe routine.

Frankly, the man's encounter with Jesus gave him sight and not just literal sight that was actually disorienting, it was his spiritual sight that transformed his world. That reoriented him and that gave him confidence.

It was his response to Jesus.

His desire to trust and believe that Jesus is the promised one of God.

To do what Jesus instructed him to do.

It was his response to Jesus that opened transformation for him that allowed confidence to replace certainty.

In worshiping Jesus, he placed all his confidence in Him. Not in certainty of the way it has always been. Not in comforting routines and plans. Not in his own ability to navigate the world. He had done just fine in the world, or so he thought.

Now in his worshiping, he is discovering a new life.

One that was more trustworthy than mere certainty because friends we now know if we didn't before – that the world changes but God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow because certainty is called into question.

God never fails. God is with us always to lead us through valleys, disorientation, to the green pastures of confidence.

Let us pray.

Oh Holy God, let us come to you with hearts ready to trust. Ready to follow your directions.

When you tell us to wash, when you tell us to keep our distance from each other. When you tell us to love our neighbor in ways that are new, may we follow and discern the new life that is nurtured when we come to you in prayer.

With the confidence and when we love others and trust, lead us into new life – especially when we do not know what that means.

Oh Holy God, may we trust.

In Jesus name we pray.

Amen

About Elizabeth Boone McLean, Pastor/Head of Staff

Explorer. Color Coder. Chef Wannabe. Amateur Art Critic.

I am an intellectual at heart who pursues knowledge and ideas that have a practical use in fulfilling our call to bring God honor and glory. In other words, with a heart being constantly filled with God's love, how do we best share that love with our neighbors? That is the guiding question of my life and ministry.

I love to learn all sorts of things: painting, cooking, traveling, theology, history, creative writing, preaching, spiritual practices, names and stories of everyone I meet. I love to connect others, to God and to each other. I love to dream big and brainstorm ideas for ministry and discern which idea God wants us to pursue. I love a good story and a good laugh and learning about each of you.

About First Presbyterian Church of Austin - 8001 Mesa Drive Austin, Texas 78731

Welcome. Our seats are filled with young and old, contemporary and traditional, lively and soft-spoken — all on a journey to know Christ better and to extend God's love within our community and to our world. All are welcome, without exception, as children of God, to participate in worship, communion, leadership, and fellowship. Whether your brand new to the Christian faith, a faith-filled follower of Christ, or somewhere in between ... we would love to meet you.

We've saved you a seat. Join us.